

Laterna Magica-

Zauberwelt und Faszination des optischen Spielzeugs

by ERNST HRABALEK. München: Keyser, 1985. 22x15cm. 175p.

It is a delight to see the books on magic lanterns published in the last few years. They are each very individual and therefore difficult to compare. This nice book, written in German, contains a lot of valuable information and is illustrated with 15 coloured (including the front cover) and about 200 black and white illustrations. A nice characteristic of the book is the section on home lanterns, mostly the so-called children's toy lanterns. Serious consideration is given to the often neglected but very nicely coloured and shapely toy lanterns.

One can divide the book roughly into three parts: a general description of magic lanterns and their history, a catalogue of the author's lanterns and a register of trade-marks and addresses of museums, clubs and auctions.

The general description begins with some comments for the collector and a few remarks about the working of a magic lantern.

Then a short historic review, starting at Fontana, reviewing the well-known giants such as Porta, Kircher, Huygens etc. to about 1900.

Hrabalek makes a note about Dechales (though calling him Dechale) who in 1674 unveiled the secret of Walgenstein's lantern. Further he cites the art of handpainting and mentions some artists.

The light source is, as we know, important for the projection. The breakthrough, not used for toy lanterns however, was the limelight. Also Davy's electric arc marks a glorious episode in the history of the magic lantern. The author says the appearance of the electric incandescent lamp brought about the end of the magic lantern. This light source was mainly used in projectors. The author differentiates thus between the magic lantern and the projector, not in a technical way but in use and appreciation.

Several kinetic slides are described and also the dissolving views with a biunial. There is even a note about the triunial: 'the first lantern projected for

instance a green landscape, the second one illustrated it with snowflakes and the third changed with the first into winter scenery'.

In the first three decades of the 19th century the toy lantern was not available in large quantities. Most of them were made by handy fathers for their children. Some of them were handsome, often with simple optics. But some of them were fantastic in form and colour. Coppersmith Lapierre started the manufacturing of toy lanterns, many others followed. Hrabalek says the French lanterns are usually multi-coloured, while the German lanterns are simpler, but on the other hand the German glass-slides are more gay and fancy.

On the theme of the images the author develops a train of thoughts, beginning with Kircher's religious prints. The bible, specially the Old Testament, took care of a pretty great part. Religion as well as superstition gave ideas for many slides. When the kinetic slides became available, many professional elocutionists froze their public with terror. On the contrary, to hold the children's attention harlequins, jumping girls, eye-moving apes, faces with variable noses were thrown on the wall.

In the 19th century the manufacture of slides with scientific subjects, such as geology, biology, astronomy and travel was astonishing. Interesting are the notes about a series like the 'Nibelungen' in 42 plates, 'Odysseus' in 62 plates and the 'Divine Comedy' of Dante in 71 plates.

The introduction of the photographic slides gave a prosaic shift. England produced a lot of slides about social abuses, such as alcoholism.

On gravures and paintings of the 18th century, we see the travelling operators with apparatus on their backs, most in the company of a young assistant who played a hand-organ or other musical instrument. Robertson in Paris was a great showman, who had introduced several tricks to amuse his public. First he placed the lantern behind the screen, so that the public did not see the lanterns

and their actions. For special effects he placed his lantern on a movable carriage. He could then move his lantern nearer or further from the screen, so that it looked as if the projected picture came from far and by growing bigger it gave the illusion of coming nearer.

Childe, of origin a painter, became a projection-artist and in 1837 introduced dissolving views (not the 'Resolving Views', as Hrabalek calls them at one point!). He was probably the inventor of the chromatrope. Some of the successful projectionists used more than two lanterns. Pepper for instance used six lanterns for his series 'Sinbad the Sailor'.

Now we come to the most important part of the book, which I have already called the 'catalogue of Hrabalek'. It is a collection of photographs of toy lanterns together with a short description and a price indication. The reader can observe the many different forms. Important is the possibility to locate an unknown lantern with this database or to discover the changes due to repair or cannibalism by a former owner. When a toy lantern was bought, it was often packed in a wonderfully illustrated packing. I am glad Hrabalek shows several of these illustrations. Such as an illustration of Max Dannhorn at Nurnberg (below). The handful of trade-marks is interesting. I should wish some more, but the list of manufacturers is impressive.



Some remarks should be made, even if one respects the amount of work which must have gone into a book like this. I feel that by reading the book, the references and bibliography are too short to explain the given details. Also, one must point out that the index is somewhat incomplete (for example omitting *dissolving views* – which are extensively discussed in the text) and that it contains many errors in those entries which are present – errors which, for the most part, are also repeated in the text. In addition to *Dechale* for Deshales already referred to, the following can be noted: *Acher* for Archer, *Oliver Cook* for Olive Cook (!), *Dunscombe* for Dunscombe, *W. G. Hughes* for W. C. Hughes, *Kohlans* for Kohlans, *L. C. Marcy* for L. J. Marcy, *Niépce* for Niépce, *Schrott* for Schott, *Wasson* or *Watson* and *Wodbury* for Woodbury. Turning to the photo-credits, one is further disappointed to see the two most prolific lenders of photographs – our well-known Society colleagues Messrs. Balzer & Piasio – referred to as *Blazer & Piassio*, and the two familiar illustrations from the Turin Museo Nazionale del Cinema Catalogue reproduced (backwards) on pages 26 and 47 credited to the Nationalmuseum, Veronal Further, a small mistake is made on pages 31 and 61 on mentioning the improvement of the oil lamp: it was made by Pierre François Aimé Argand (not Jean Robert Argand) in 1783 (not 1789).

Willem Tebra
Amsterdam, December 1985

The book as described above, which is in soft covers, is available for £10.00. In addition, a hardback 'limited edition' of it has been created by the author – replacing the cover illustration (far left) with a duplication of the plate on page 140 and substituting the variant title *Laterna Magica – Optisches Spielzeug* (Sonderausgabe Becker Guss, Wien). The price of this edition (illustrated left) – of which 200 copies have been produced, each numbered and signed by the author – is £30.00.

